BYZANTINOSLAVICA

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An Emperor's Abdication

AVERIL CAMERON (London)

It was no doubt to be expected that the emperor Justinian should have eclipsed his predecessors and successors in the eyes of posterity. His achievements were enormous and spectacular. Moreover, the years after his death seemed to mark a sharp decline in Byzantine fortunes, not merely in a general running down of the economy[1] but also in those areas of conquest which had been so magnificent — in Italy with the coming of the Lombards in 568 and on the Persian frontier with the revival of Persian hostilities.[2] Yet Justin II (A. D. 565—578), like his wife Sophia,[3] was a fascinating and ultimately a pathetic figure. We can in fact reconstruct remarkably well what was to be perhaps the most striking moment in his reign, a moment which moved all contemporaries deeply and which offers a unique but not unusual human insight into early Byzantine history.

The occasion is the appointment of Tiberius as Caesar in December, 574. Justin began his reign with great hopes and high ambitions.[4] But Italy was overrun by the Lombards, war broke out again with Persia and Justin's frugality did not bring political benefits; six years after the beginning of his reign he launched into a fierce persecution of Monophysites.[5] The last straw was the Persian capture of the Roman fortress of Dara in 573. This was the greatest of the Roman fortifications in Mesopotamia; its fall to Persia was almost inconceivable, yet the inconceivable had happened and this was merely the first and worst blow in a renewed war which was to drag on for decades. The news of the fall of Dara drove Justin out of his wits[6] and for a time the government had to be carried on by his wife Sophia.[7]

We owe to a contemporary, the Monophysite bishop John of Ephesus, author of a precious ecclesiastical history in Syriac, all kinds of tales

[1] E. g. Proc., *Anecd.* 24; *Nov.* 148 (a. 566); Agathias, *Hist.* V. 13; Corippus, *In laudem Iustini* II (quoted below as *Cor.*, *Iust.*) II, 260 f.

[2] See in general J. B. Bury, *History of the Later Roman Empire from Arcadius to Irene* 2, London 1889. Most histories of the later empire end with the death of Justinian, like Bury's own later work. A. H. M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire. A Social and Economic Survey 284—602,* Oxford 1964, 303 f., takes the story further, though briefly. On the other hand histories of Byzantium also tend to be unsatisfactory on this 'early' period, and A. N. Stratos, *Byzantium in the Seventh Century,* vol. I, II, London 1968, 1972, does not begin until 602.

[3] See my article *The Empress Sophia,* Byzantion XLV (1975) 5—21.

[4] See especially Cor., *Iust.,* written within a year or scarcely more of Justin's accession, in particular II. 178 ff., 333 ff.

[5] John of Ephesus, *Historia ecclesiastica* (quoted below as Joh. Eph., *Hist. eccl.*) III. 1, transl. R. Payne-Smith, Oxford 1860. A Latin translation exists by E. W. Brooks in the *CSCO* series, *Scriptores Syri* ser. III. iii, Louvain 1936. The History began with Julius Caesar, but we possess only the major portion of part III, which goes from Justin II to the beginnings of the reign of Maurice (582—602). The version of Payne-Smith, though reliable (Brooks, iv) and extremely useful, changes the order of John's chapters in an arbitrary fashion and sometimes paraphrases without translating.

[6] Evagrius, *Hist. eccl.* V. 11; John of Epiphaneia, FHG IV. 275; Theophylact Simocatta III. 11. 3.

[7] Gregory of Tours, *Historiae Francorum libri decem* (quoted below as Greg. Tur., *Hist. Fr.*) V. 19.

about Justin's malady, which John saw as an immediate punishment for his religious persecutions. The emperor would bark like a dog, bleat like a goat, hide under beds, try to throw himself out of windows and generally behave in such a way that all the windows in his apartments had to be barred and boarded up.[8] One successful invention for Justin's comfort was a throne on wheels, on which his attendants could pull him to and fro. Organ music would calm him, but there were still dangerous moments such as when he struck the patriarch to the ground.[9] John's narrative makes fascinating reading; he continues with sensational allegations against the empress, Sophia, niece of Theodora, according to which she was 'not only not chastened or alarmed' by Justin's plight 'but was rather elated, and said "the kingdom came through me and it has come back to me: and as for him, he is chastised and has fallen into this trial on my account, because he did not value me sufficiently, and vexed me".'[10] Not surprisingly, most people thought her wicked to say such things, and John's opinion about Justin's illness was different, as we have seen. But Sophia was a formidable woman,[10a] and John's whole narrative of the events is too circumstantial for us to dismiss his stories as mere gossip. He was indeed an eye witness and an intimate friend of the emperor Tiberius.[11] What he has to say later about the relations between Sophia and Tiberius makes even more sensational reading and is equally plausible;[12] but we are here concerned with one precise moment, the day on which Justin — at Sophia's prompting[13] — created Tiberius Caesar.

We have four accounts of the speech which Justin made, of which three are either contemporary or derive from contemporary sources. These are by John of Ephesus (the longest and most elaborate), Evagrius, bishop of Caesarea, who wrote his *Ecclesiastical History* in the reign of Maurice (562—602), Theophylact Simocatta, who wrote a *History* in the reign of Heraclius (610—641), taking Maurice's accession as his starting point, but with some digressions going further back, and finally the ninth century chronicler Theophanes, who was copying Theophylact. Of the three earlier sources, John and Evagrius could have got their information direct, while Theophylact probably used John of Epiphaneia, who had continued Agathias' *History* down to 590.[14] The interesting feature is the variety between the three versions, all of them arresting in themselves but quite different from each other. Justin's speech is certainly worth knowing in any of the versions, and in view of their exceptional interest I propose to give all three in translation so that they can be compared:

(a) **John of Ephesus, III. 5:**

'When king Justin had continued in this state of trial and sickness, and oppressed with other evils, for a period of five years,[15] and the

[8] Joh. Eph., *Hist. eccl.* III. 2. [9] *Ibid.*, III. 3. [10] *Ibid.*, III. 4.
[10a] *Art. cit.* (n. 3 above). [11] *Ibid.*, III. 22.
[12] *Ibid.*, III. 9 f. See *art. cit.* (n. 3 above). [13] Evagrius, *Hist. eccl.*, V. 13.
[14] So Evagrius, *Hist. eccl.* V. 24. For Theophylact see O. Veh, *Untersuchungen zu dem byzantinischen Historiker Theophylaktos Simokattes*, Wiss. Beitr. zum Jahresber. 1956/1957 des Human. Gymnas. Fürth i. Bay (1957) 8, 12; Z. V. Udal'cova, *К вопросу о мировоззрении византийского историка VII в. Феофилакта Симокатты*, Зборник рад. Виз. инст. 11 (1968) 9 ff.
[15] John's chronology has gone wrong here. The five years (cf. III. 2 *fin*) are from 573—578, when Justin died. John correctly dates the appointment of Tiberius

sixth had begun, being thus chastised by the operation of the devil, all business being neglected, and matters of state in confusion, and wars with the barbarians coming in quick succession in every quarter, the whole senate took counsel with the queen to make the God-loving Tiberius king, and appoint him as Caesar to conduct in Justin's stead all matters of state. And to this Justin himself consented; for there were intervals, though coming irregularly, when he recovered the use of his senses, and could converse upon matters connectedly. After a long consultation, therefore, with him, they chose and appointed Tiberius as Caesar, as for a long time he had been Justin's keeper,[16] even before he had come to the crown. Upon Justin's summoning him, therefore, and solemnly investing him with the dress and insignia of royalty, an angel, as he himself acknowledged, appeared to him, and stood by him, and dictated in his ear the words with which he was to address Tiberius Caesar: and he began to speak unto him words of wonder and astonishment, as though his mind had never sustained any injury. For weeping, and with his words broken by tears and sobs, he said, "O son Tiberius, come and take the kingdom of the wretched Justin, who has made God angry, so that He has rejected him, and cast him out of his royal estate while still living. Come, my son, enter upon thy office, and displace him who has set his Creator at nought, that Creator Who gave him the kingdom, from which his own eyes now see him rejected and fallen." And when he thus spake with a loud voice in the presence of the many thousands assembled there, all who heard his words broke out into bitter weeping and loud sobs; and especially when he turned round, and waving his hand towards the soldiers posted there, said to them with a loud voice, "Open, my children, your ranks, and let whoever will come in, and see the wretched Justin stripped and fallen from his kingdom, because he has provoked to anger and wrath that true and eternal King Whose empire passeth not away, and Who had bestowed upon him, unworthy as he was, the kingdom. And now, O Tiberius, let my fate be to thee a terror, and alarm, and trembling, before the Lord the eternal King, that thou beware of Him, and stir Him not up to anger by thy evil deeds, as I have done, by those deeds of mine, which have brought down upon me this severe and terrible chastisement. For lo! while I yet live, I am stripped and ejected from my kingdom, because I have acted iniquitously therein. Beware, lest this apparel and royal dress lead thee astray, as it has led me, and fill thee with pride and error and presumption, and bring upon thee the wrath of Heaven, as it has upon me, and thou too be stripped, and fall from thy kingdom, as I this day. Look, my son, at him who stands by me, and whispers to me in my ear, and teaches me all those things which I speak unto thee, and teach thee, and command thee and admonish thee; and be thou sure and convinced, and aware within thyself, that what is now spoken to thee by me is not of me,

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as Caesar (574) at the end of III. 5; Justin had fallen ill after the loss of Dara in 573 (see above) and John wrongly implies here that the appointment as Caesar did not come for another five years, whereas elsewhere (III. 6) he shows that he knows that four years elapsed between Tiberius's appointment as Caesar and his appointment as Augustus in 578 (cf. Theophanes, pp. 247—249 de Boor).

[16] Justin had had Tiberius appointed count of the excubitors before his own accession; a position in which he could be instrumental in securing the throne for Justin — see Cor., *Iust.* I. 212 f. For Tiberius's intimacy with Justin cf. Joh. Eph., *Hist. eccl.* III. 22.

but comes from this angel of God. And if thou, or any one besides, seest him not, behold he stands by me, and teaches me those things which I say unto thee, that thou mayest fear, and be afraid at the dread sentence of justice decreed against and inflicted upon me, as, lo! thou and all men see. For because I have not kept God's commandments, He now strips and ejects me from my kingdom, and delivers it unto thee. Look therefore on me, my son, and from my case take an example of terror and alarm for thy own heart, at the sentence which has gone out against me and let it not be lifted up into evil deeds, such as I have done, lest wrath be sent down also upon thee from Heaven, as it has now upon me, and thou too be cast out of thy kingdom. Beware, therefore, lest thou give way to wicked men, who will counsel thee unto evil, and lead thee astray as they have led me astray, until I have made God angry by all my doings." These words, and many more to the same effect, but which we have omitted because of their too great length, were spoken by the king, in sorrow and tears, with a loud voice, in the presence of all men: while the illustrious Tiberius threw off his robe, and fell on his face to the ground at the king's feet, and gave unrestrained sway to his lamentation with tears and sobs of bitter sorrow, in which the whole senate, and all who stood around joined, when they heard these things, and saw both him who was giving up the kingdom, and him who was summoned to receive it, the prey of such deep anguish. And when they took hold of Tiberius, and raised him from the ground, he fell again on his face with a loud wail. And at this, all the multitudes at once, with one cry of mighty suffering, and from their hearts, lamented with loud voice, nor could any one check or restrain his tears on hearing the words which the king, weeping at his humiliation, spake. And finally, he gave orders, and they raised Tiberius up, and again he addressed him in language broken by sobs: and then he invested him with the insignia and dress and emblems of royalty, and said, "Henceforward be thy name called Constantine; for in thee shall the kingdom of the great Constantine be renewed." The rest, want of space alone compels us to omit. The day of the appointment of Tiberius as Caesar was the seventh day of the earlier Conun, in the year eight hundred and eighty-six, on the day of the preparation, in the morning (Friday, Dec. 7, A. D. 574).

So firmly persuaded were all men that these words were not spoken by the king himself, but by an angel of God, that when at length pictures were set up in honour of Tiberius and Justin, an angel was painted standing between them, and with his mouth at Justin's ear: and that the fact was really so, was firmly received by every one. The words themselves were taken down in shorthand by many who were present, and at once committed to writing; for there were numerous scribes present taking notes: but their full and exact recital would exceed our limits' (trans. Payne-Smith).

Evagrius, Hist. eccl. V. 13:

' "Take care lest the appearance of this dress lead you astray,[17] or the performance of what you can see now. I was lifted up by them[18] and failed to see that I had become deserving of the severest punish-

[17] See John of Ephesus, above, p. 5.
[18] *Ibid.*

ment. Repair my mistakes, leading the state through every kind of good." And indicating the ministers he said that they should not be believed, adding that "they have brought me to what you see", and other things of the same sort which reduced everyone to emotion and floods of tears.'

Theophylact, Hist. III. 11. 5 f.:

[Theophylact first apologises for the uncouth style of Justin's speech, which he declares he will record exactly as it was delivered, without embellishment]

III. 11. 7 f.: 'The senate, then, gathered together, and the order of clergy together with their leader who directs the rudder of the church,[19] and the emperor, standing on a platform, gave this advice to Tiberius: "See it is God who does you this good, God is giving you this position, not I. Honour it, that you may be honoured by Him(?). Honour your mother who was once your sovereign; you know that you were first her slave[20] but are now her son. Do not rejoice in bloodshed, do not participate in murder,[21] do not return evil for evil, do not equal me in hatred. For I have been repaid as a mortal man (for indeed I stumbled) and have received according to my sins. But I will have vengeance for those who have done this to me at the tribunal of Christ. Do not be excited by this position as I was.[22] Be to all as you are to yourself. Know what you were and what you are now. Do not be arrogant, and you will not go wrong. You know what I was and what I became and what I am. All these here are your children and slaves. You know that I have preferred you to my own family.[23] Look at these and you are looking at all the population of the state. Be careful of your army. Do not receive flatterers. Let none say to you that your predecessor behaved in that way; for I say this in the light of my sufferings. Let those who have property[24] enjoy it; and to those who have none, give." And after the prayer had been said by the patriarch, and all had said amen, and the Caesar had fallen at the feet of the emperor,[25] the emperor said to him "If you will it, I am; if you do not will it, I am not. May God, who made all heaven and earth, Himself put into your heart what I have forgotten to say to you." This was spoken in the seventh month, December, on the 6th day, in the ninth indiction.[26]

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[19] I represent Theophylact's flowery, 'classicising' style as it is in the Greek.

[20] The reference is to Sophia. 'Slave' is the regular word used of subjects in relation to the emperor.

[21] Justin must be alluding to his religious persecutions.

[22] Cf. John of Ephesus, Evagrius.

[23] Justin had an eligible grandnephew, Justinian, who was in fact the centre of plots against Tiberius at the latter's accession as Augustus — Greg. Tur., *Hist. Fr.* V. 30. The young man himself was probably innocent, however, for Tiberius pardoned him and treated him with honour.

[24] The hallmark of Justin's economic policy had been extreme parsimony and frugality (condemned by his enemies as greed, e. g. Evagrius, *Hist. eccl.* V. 1; Greg. Tur., *Hist. Fr.* IV. 40; Joh. Eph., *Hist. eccl.* V. 20), whereas Tiberius was to be remembered for his generosity (or extravagance, cf. Joh. Eph., *Hist. eccl.* III. 11, 22), which began as soon as he became Caesar. The management of money was the main point at issue politically — cf. Evagrius, *Hist. eccl.* V. 13 *fin.*, 14.

[25] John of Ephesus, p. 6 above.

[26] A. D. 574.

III. 12. 1 'And when the emperor's discourse was finished, applause gushed forth from his subjects and acclamations as it were poured forth more fiercely than a shower of rain. For in reality the appointment of the Caesar was not unremarkable.'

Theophanes, p. 248:

A version of Theophylact's speech with only minor textual differences, but omitting the introduction and modifying the conclusion—p. 249.8 'with this speech the emperor filled the gathering with tears'.[27] But Theophanes has displaced the speech and seems to be placing it in 577 (the year of the return of the exiled patriarch Eutychius, cf. p. 248.13) and making it refer to Tiberius's appointment as Augustus, not as Caesar (cf. p. 248.17 f.); the appointment as Caesar is related in its proper place, but without the speech (p. 247.28 f). In any case Tiberius's appointment as Augustus took place in 578, only nine days before Justin's death.[28]

It seems impossible to reconcile these accounts. John's is clearly the most circumstantial (as is his narrative in general) and the author elsewhere professes strict fairness based on personal knowledge;[29] on the other hand it is the most embroidered. Evagrius's version is brief, a mere summary, but a fair one. Theophylact's, on the other hand, bears unmistakeable marks of authenticity; even if the author did not specifically claim to be reporting the exact words the emperor we should suspect that he was, for the abrupt style of the speech is utterly removed from Theophylact's flowery verbosity. Furthermore, the 'confessional' aspect of the speech coincides strikingly with the tone of Justin's two speeches at his accession, recorded by Corippus, in which Justin includes a remarkably frank allusion to the present ills of the state;[30] the same is true of *Nov.* 148, from the first year of his reign. The difficulty lies in John of Ephesus's clear statement[31] that Justin's speech on this occasion was taken down by 'many' who were present and 'numerous scribes'. He implies in the same passage that even his own lengthy version is an abbreviation. But here perhaps is our safety valve—we may allow that all the versions of the speech derive directly from contemporary sources, but that all are equally abbreviations of the original. They will, therefore (as they do), differ in detail but not in the basic tone and feeling of the speech, and this we found to be the case.

John has much more to tell us about Justin, Sophia and Tiberius. The latter was a paragon, though still a young man; John assures us that as emperor he practised 'the same frankness and humility as of old, without

[27] John of Ephesus, Evagrius.
[28] Joh. Eph., *Hist. eccl.* III. 6 *fin.*
[29] Joh. Eph., *Hist. eccl.* III. 22.
[30] Cor., *Iust.* II. 178 ff., 333 ff. Of course Corippus is probably elaborating the speeches, but he would be unlikely to invent this particular slant.
[31] Joh. Eph., *Hist. eccl.* III. 5 *fin,* p. 7 above.

being changed or filled with pride' ... 'up to this present time, which is the third year of his reign (i.e. A.D. 581), besides the four years during which he was Caesar, he conducts himself with nobleness and humility'.[32] Not only that, he was tall and handsome, sensible and charitable.[33] Yet even John preserves hints of criticism—for his mild disposition ('many find fault with him as being too quiet and humble and inspiring no fear; but in spite of their representations he still continues his gentleness of demeanour up to this present time'),[34] and above all for his lavish spending.[35] Furthermore, he had a wife and children, which put him in a delicate position in the face of the advances of the empress Sophia;[36] Theophanes even tells us (he is wrong, in light of John's evidence, but the mistake is indicative of the awkwardness of the situation) that Sophia was in ignorance of his wife's existence;[37] certainly she compromised herself and even refused to leave the Imperial Palace after Justin's death. The unhappy Tiberius was reduced to building new quarters for himself and his family, though he did manage to oust Sophia in the end.[38]

Tiberius had only four years to live. He felt himself failing in 582 and (surprisingly, after what had passed between them) called on Sophia for advice about a successor.[39] This time there was no emotional speech making. The succession passed smoothly to the general Maurice, who was to reign for twenty years until brutally murdered by the savage Phocas.

Justin's reign was inevitably an anti-climax after the long years of Justinian. But it set in train a new direction in Byzantine history. The Imperialist and expansionist aims of Justinian's years had been shown up to be hopelessly ill founded. Byzantium must fight a retaining battle and must inevitably turn back upon her inner resources. Justin was not able to see this, and tragically fell a victim to madness. Sophia schemed for her own personal ends. Tiberius was only given four years and spent most of that time fighting defensive wars. Maurice had longer, but fell a victim to bloody conspiracy. Byzantium needed (and got, in Heraclius) a figure of stature who would bring her through the vital struggles which were bound to come and which were during the seventh century to reshape the Byzantine state. That figure was not to be found in Justin II, a man dominated by his wife and a prey to delusions; but his moment of pathos and dignity on investing another with the necessary share in his own power elevates him to a position higher than the oblivion to which he is usually consigned.

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[32] Joh. Eph., *Hist. eccl.* III. 22.
[33] Evagrius, *Hist. eccl.* V. 13 *fin.*
[34] III. 22.
[35] III. 11.
[36] III. 8 f.
[37] P. 244.31.
[38] Joh. Eph., *Hist. eccl.* III. 23; Theophanes, p. 250.10 f. (wrongly dating the Sophiae palace).
[39] Greg. Tur., *Hist. Fr.* VI. 30. See Journ. of Theol. Stud. 26 (1975) 421—426.

SOMMAIRE

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